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Weatherization training center opens in Clearfield

Energy » Utah was quick to use stimulus money to prepare houses for winter.

By María Villaseñor
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While some states are barely starting to organize weatherization-assistance programs to make homes energy-efficient for fixed- or low-income populations, Utah has already capitalized on federal stimulus dollars, said state program director Michael Johnson.

The U.S. Department of Energy allocated nearly \$38 million to Utah's program that must be used before April 2012. Johnson said the money has nearly tripled the weatherization program's \$5 million annual budget.

Standing in a warehouse Wednesday at the Clearfield Freeport Center, Johnson oversaw the program's first statewide training workshop in its new facility -- a shared space that also houses administrative offices and storage for Davis, Morgan and Weber counties' weatherization programs.

"It allows us to get our people trained faster and better," Johnson said of the facility, which when completed will include a test house as well as sample ducts and frames where staffers can learn how to insulate a home or perform an energy audit. Before the training center opened, employees waited for a homeowner willing to let the home be a training ground and hoped the weather would be accommodating, Johnson said.

Soon, "we'll be able to do one-on-one training at the drop of a hat," he said. And there's a host of new employees ready for extra and specialized training.

Last year, there were about 70 staffers in all of Utah's eight weatherization agencies spread across the state. As of July, another 77 were added, Johnson said, and dozens more were hired since then, with many hires coming from the depressed construction market.

"It's tripling our production," he said of the free, two- to four-month process to evaluate homes, order and install equipment, and educate homeowners on energy efficiency.

Previously, there's been a backlog of people who apply and qualify for the service, resulting in a waiting time of one to two years; now it's six to eight months.

The extra hires have nearly doubled the weatherization team on the Navajo reservation in southwest Utah, said area director Nelson Yellowman, whose team attended Wednesday's training workshop on insulation.

His three-man crew increased by two people three months ago. Yellowman's waiting lists consistently averaged around 220 homes; the extra staffers helped drop that number to 150 homes.

With the Utah crews making so much progress, Johnson said Utah could end up with other states' stimulus money because they could fall short of the April 2012 deadline.

mariav@sltrib.com

Weatherization Assistance Program

The state program, a part of the Utah Division of Housing and Community Development, assists fixed- or low-income households in improving the energy efficiency of their homes. More information is available at housing.utah.gov.

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